

The God who speaks

Chris Caradus
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Introduction

Well it is that last weekend of the holidays... the last day in fact – school tomorrow for most under the age of 17; and for those over the age of 17 no more excuse for late starts or early finishes; from tomorrow morning we all put our heads down and get into the serious business of the year ahead whatever it may hold! But I wonder if we can keep the relaxed and easy ambience of the holiday season alive for just a few more hours!

Of course one way of doing this, they say, is to think about your next holiday; perhaps think about going back to the place you've just visited – this time without the rain; or think about spending some more time in that place you just had opportunity to visit; maybe the next great walk you want to do or mountain you want to climb; if you are not yet up for this and cannot bring yourself to spend some time living in the future, then another approach is to recall the most pleasurable aspects of the holiday past; this is what I do about this time, trying to recreate the sensation of ease and relaxation...

For me one of the most enjoyable things I like to do when on holiday is sleep in a tent – a man of simple pleasures and tastes; and the really great thing about sleeping in a tent, is that when you wake up, and heat from the rising sun finally drives you out of your sleeping bag, and out of the tent is that you are pretty much useless for anything other than collapsing into a camping chair with a stiff cup of coffee and a good book; at some stage breakfast will intrude on this repose along with another cup of coffee and a layer of sunscreen; but soon you are again immersed in your book, oblivious to everything else in the world, other than the warm sun on the parts of your body that got burnt yesterday, and the various morning sounds of the small creatures that live in the vicinity of your tent; then 2 hours later second breakfast beckons, and after that you settle into the long haul of reading until lunch time; about 12:30 someone cries out, “who’s doing lunch?” and you slump a little deeper into your camp chair; then someone else stomps up, back from the beach or a morning walk and says, “What are we doing today?” Because they are now standing in front of you they are a little hard to ignore, so you yawn, stretch and reply, “Dunno – let me just finish my chapter” hoping they will go away; after lunch, which some kind-hearted individual has prepared, you decide that you must make some concession to the action-oriented people in your group; so after much debate it is decided that we will all drive down to the dairy to get an ice-cream; then it’s back to the camp site to wash it down with a cup of coffee and hopefully a bit more reading before tea; then of course, in the evening - games, another coffee or two and a few more chapters before bed; and so day blends into glorious day of inactivity until someone says, “can we please go home?”

Maybe not your idea of a holiday, but it certainly comprises at least the first part of any holiday that I would choose; however, one thing that I noticed about myself during the first few days of such a period of studied inactivity that I enjoyed between Christmas and New Year, was that, although the novels were opened regularly enough, my Bible remained unopened; strange I thought: I’m doing much more reading than I normally do but I have no desire to read my Bible; at this point of course I could have taken myself in hand, and given myself a good spiritual spanking; then read the obligatory Psalm and chapter of the New Testament; then having salved my conscience simply gone back to my book; but I didn’t – I just said fine – so be it; the next day, as I again settled down to my morning read, I again saw the Bible on the camping table and my feelings were exactly the same; however, now there

were no pangs of guilt or “should and ought” thoughts going around in my head; I had obviously seared my conscience! However the following day was different; when I saw my forlorn unopened Bible sitting there I wanted to open it up and read; strange! I thought, for some reason I wanted to read Hebrews – a book I hadn’t delved into for years! so I picked up the Bible and read the book of Hebrews; and thoroughly enjoyed it for that matter; so this morning I am going to share with you a little of the fruit of my holiday reading; not Leon Uris or TK Roxborough but the writer of the NT letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 1.1-5

<Read Hebrews 1.1-5>

Now what do you think? When you are reading the Bible in holiday mode, because you want to, rather than because you feel you really should do, what is the first question you ask yourself when you start to read? OK what about a novel you pick up?

Does this interest me? Does this grab me in some way?

When you sit down to read a novel, you are asking yourself this question from the opening lines of the first chapter; and if you find yourself having to re-read the first page you will probably toss the book aside; every author knows this: the reader’s interest must be captured quickly if the book is going to be finished (and then recommended to someone else!); same thing is true when you read the Newspaper, for what it is worth; if the article really doesn’t interest you then you will skip it and read on; and when it comes to reading the Bible the same principle applies; something we are reading needs to capture our interest quickly, or it all becomes just words on the page and we find that we have read a chapter and... “what was that all about?”; so let’s at least avoid that problem this morning and ask ourselves, is there anything that I read from Heb 1 that captures our interest... your interest?

For me: God speaking; whole chapter is full of statements about God speaking:

‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets...’

‘in these last days he has spoken to us by a son...’

‘the Son sustains all things by his powerful word...’

‘to which of the angels did God ever say?...’

‘and when he brings the first born into the world he says...’

‘of the angels he says... but of the son he says...’

‘and to which of the angels has he ever said...’

So, let’s think about our experience of God speaking.

It was my own experience of God speaking that drew me to the Christian faith many years ago; I was raised in a church family and taken to church for as long as I can remember - by and large I found it boring but I must admit I always found Sunday School at least entertaining – including being hit over the head with an embossed Bible by Michael Smiley (God have mercy on his soul); as I was coming to the end of my sixth form year I was rapidly losing interest in church life when the strangest thing happened; I was at a party one night and a group of us were sitting outside - it was a clear night; I looked up into the night sky and suddenly felt myself to be looking up into the face of God; this was a completely

new experience for me and I had no way of understanding it; no one around me was aware of anything, but the sense of God looking down on me and communicating something personal was palpable; I now call it my “Psalm 19 experience”: <read Psalm 19.1-4>; there were no distinct words, no audible voice but communication was occurring all the same; I felt God inviting me into relationship with him in some way; I had been involved in church things all my life; but from that day I was personally hooked on God; regardless of what I liked or disliked about the church, liked or disliked about the way the gospel message was presented in church, I would stick with this Christianity business because I had discovered a God who speaks.

This experience was not unique to this particular situation nor it is unique to me; many people claim to have heard God speak to them “wordlessly” and “inaudibly” within the context of the natural world; in this sense the world that we live in is a bit like the matrix; remember the movie? The ‘matrix’ is a construct within a computer; to those who are plugged into the matrix, it is like living within a normal physical world in normal time; but to those who have been unplugged, the world is what it is (which in the movie is a post nuclear holocaust cinder) and the matrix it is a never ender sequence of “0”’s and “1”’s drifting down the computer screen; this of course is code, code that describes and constructs the matrix inside the computer and it all means something; and if those outside the matrix can learn to read the code, then they can work out what is going on inside the matrix – where the sentinels are, and even perhaps see the girl in the red dress!

The world that we live in is a bit like this; it’s a real physical world that we live in and simply take for granted every day; but it is also a continual stream of “god-chatter”; if we can stop long enough and tune in to its stillness, then we can indeed hear God speak; not an audible voice that gives us instruction, but a wordless communication inviting us to continue to develop relationship with God.

However this is not what the opening verses of Hebrews 1 initially focus on; the focus here is on God speaking by means of people using audible words that we can hear and understand; who are these people? In the past prophets – ‘once upon a time’ as the story goes; and who are the prophets? Well, really they are the preachers of the OT; a long line of very colourful and different people from Moses to John the Baptist – as colourful and as different from each other as preachers are today (God never uses a “certain sort of person” to speak); but now God has spoken and continues to speak through ‘the Son’; and who is ‘the Son’? the children should be able to answer this one! Jesus; Ah, but who is Jesus? A prophet sure – “the prophet” that Moses spoke of who was coming after him’; God? Sure, but distinct from God because he is called “the Son” or “the Son of God”; so who is this Jesus through whom God now speaks – clearly and intelligibly?

Well the writer to the Hebrews goes on to tell us; like every good story, after introducing the main character it goes on to develop that character; and the character of Jesus is developed very quickly by four statements uttered in rapid succession (this story does not take a long time to get into!): ‘whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the universe; he is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word’.

Let’s take the first two statements: ‘whom he appointed the heir of all things, though whom he also created the universe’

What does this mean? “The heir of all things”? I understand this statement as saying two things about Jesus;

- (i) Jesus is the last of the prophets – he inherits the whole prophetic tradition as it were; all that God wants to say to us, to every person in every place has been said by Jesus and no one else is needed; that means that any person who now claims to

speaking for God in some way must echo the words of Jesus – there is nothing new that can be said;

- (ii) (ii) But it is more than this: *heir of all things*; Jesus is the person who gets to inherit the whole world? What does an heir get to do? Wind up the estate; my sister and I are to inherit my parents' estate; what will we sit down and do together when that happens? Decide what we want to keep and what we want to dispose of; and this is what Jesus is ultimately going to do with the whole world - decide what stays and what goes – in short the eternal destiny of every person and every thing in the world as we know it; Jesus is the person who has the last word on every person's life and his word about your life will determine your eternal destiny; not anyone else, just Jesus.

What about the next statement? "through whom God also created the world"? (NIV "universe" NRSV "words" but literally just "ages"). What does the Bible say about the way in which the world we live in was made? Genesis 1: it is described as a speech-act by God; 'God said let there be light and there was light...'; Jesus is the pre-existent being through whom God spoke to bring the whole universe into existence; So Jesus' words not only wind the world up but brought it into being in the first place;

Let's move onto the next pair of statements: *"he is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being"* – To me this is a statement about the truthfulness and reliability of Jesus words, as heard and recorded by people 2000 years ago, and as final judge of every person's life; Jesus words are not "pretty much what God wants to say", or "approximately right"; they represent God entirely as Jesus himself does; everything about God, everything that God wants to communicate to us about himself and about ourselves is communicated perfectly and completely through the words of Jesus; nothing Jesus has said needs to be added to or corrected; when it comes to God's word, no one has said it better than Jesus.

And finally, *"Sustaining all things by his powerful word"*; Here's the climax - Jesus' words are not only the creative words that brought the universe into existence, not only God's final and complete word to us and the words that will wrap up the entire universe, utterly reliable at that. Jesus' words, recorded and unrecorded, continually sustain and uphold this universe and the life of every creature within it. Everything in this world owes its existence to Jesus' word, its future to Jesus' word and its ongoing life in this world now to Jesus' words. In fact, the whole fabric of the universe we live in owes its continued stability to the words of Jesus, already uttered, uttered and recorded, and yet to be uttered. That's what the writer to the Hebrews is claiming about Jesus!

However, at this point things might be seen to have come unstuck. For how does a statement like this stack up against the tragedy that we have witnessed unfolding in Haiti over the past weeks? And how does it stack up against that major health trauma that a loved one suffers? How are we to understand the claim that all aspects of life in this world are upheld and sustained by God's word to us in Jesus when our marriage fails, or we lose our job, or we can't find a job or we fail our university course or the car breaks down or the washing machine gives up at the most inconvenient time? On the one hand the Bible says that Jesus' powerful word that brought the world into being and will close it down sustains every aspect of life in this world; on the other hand we daily experience things that come under the heading: It didn't work out the way we thought it would, the way we were told it should, the way it was supposed to, the way it was designed to, even the way we believed God intended it to"

For me, two things have occurred over the past couple of weeks that have forced this question on me again. The first is of course the nameless horror of Haiti. I can't remember seeing or reading about anything like this in my life - 200,000 dead, over a million people homeless, a country ruined and on the brink of chaos with absolutely no social infrastructure

of any form, no national security intact, no employment prospects for so many, little food and water; and on the other end of the scale, an eggbound chicken in my backyard! The contrast seems ridiculous - Haiti is a global crisis whereas the eggbound chicken represented something of a personal crisis. For here, with one of God's creatures which has been created to lay an egg pretty much every day, and had been doing so, something went wrong with a normal natural process, set in place and sustained by God's powerful word in Jesus, and the egg got stuck!

So let's start with Haiti. If everything in this world is sustained, borne up or borne along by Jesus' creative, discriminating and powerful word, then why did God allow the unprecedented destruction of Port-au-Prince with the death of well over 200,000 people, along with the nameless suffering and destitution inflicted on over one million people? It would seem that the sustaining word was rather absent on that morning...; options?

(1) God really had nothing to do with it. It was an earthquake. Given the earth's crust is constructed of plates that move and jostle around on a layer of magma, earthquakes, or the shifting of the earth's surface at plate boundaries due to the natural build up of pressure is inevitable. The tragedy was not the fact of the earthquake – it was not a natural disaster but a natural occurrence. The disaster was caused by the fact that a huge city housing a million people was constructed of materials that could not withstand the shake, and that when the buildings that the residents had constructed themselves collapsed many of them were crushed. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? But what is wrong with it as a solution? It assumes that God sustains the world solely through processes and mechanisms that he has built into the created order, much like clockwork, and then walks away and lets it all happen mechanically. For sure God uses mechanisms to sustain the world - scientific observation over the past 500 years has identified many of them. But that does not mean God is distant or disengaged from them - God knew what was going to happen and let it happen.

(2) It was divine Judgement. Apparently a well known evangelist has already suggested this, and I guess in the history of Haiti, enough has been done to incur the wrath of God. However there are some problems with this approach. Firstly, if it was divine judgement, why have the innocent suffered? Judgement cannot be arbitrary. If it is, then it is not justice but injustice. Secondly, when we look at the Bible there are a number of things we can conclude about the nature of divine judgement that should make us hesitate to take this line:

(i) The first thing we can say is that God is very slow to judge and only judges when all possibility of repentance is exhausted – the Bible calls this hardening. God prefers to give people time and give them grace but if people just go on ignoring God's grace then they become hardened to it and judgement inevitably must follow. But God's intention is that people receive his grace and forgiveness rather than becoming subject to judgement.

(ii) God seems to give extensive warning of an impending judgement to (at least some) along with specific reasons as to why that judgement is coming. The exile of Israel and Judah in the sixth century BC is a classic example of this. The life of Jeremiah as recorded in the Bible is an expression of God's desire to warn and his readiness to avert judgement, even at the last hour, should people have a change of heart in response to the warning.

(iii) Finally, God's judgement is never a simple walloping for wrongdoing. In many ways the Bible considers the consequences of a sinful life judgement enough for sin. God's judgement, in this age at least, is ultimately to give them a future. Again Israel's exile is an example of this: according to Jeremiah, with whom did the real future of Israel lie after exile? With those dragged off to Babylon as prisoners of war or with the ones that the Babylonians graciously left behind in the land? With those taken away! The nation of Israel was reborn from the exiles some 70 years later.

Therefore we need to be very careful about deciding after the event that a disaster killing and maiming lots of people is divine judgement, because if we get it wrong the consequences in

terms of impugning God's character are horrendous. By such judgements ourselves we can actually be reinforcing a pagan view of God in which God or the gods are angry, vengeful spirits who look for opportunity to wallop people and need to be placated.

(3) God indeed allowed this disaster to occur as the inevitable result of the natural mechanisms by which God governs the world. God indeed had the power to prevent it but did not. In the end God bears responsibility for it and we cannot let God off the hook, so how can we understand this? Well I don't think that there are any trite answers to this question – there is a paradox or a mystery here, but there are some very important things that we can and must say in the light of it:

(i) Firstly, in this world as it stands, suffering is inevitable. It is as inevitable as earthquakes, as gravitational attraction. In this world as it stands, every living creature will suffer to some extent or another as surely as the sun rises and sets, it is a law of nature – the law of tooth and claw - why? Well the first three chapters of the Bible are an attempt to answer that question. It tells us that at least 4000 years ago people were grappling with the same sort of issues that we grapple with today, and the answer it gives? Human rebellion has unleashed a chaotic element into the created order which has disrupted its harmony and undermined the relationships within society and within the created order itself by which that harmony is maintained. Human freedom- which is a necessity for real love - introduced the potential for human rebellion, which disrupted the created order that God as God had planned it and opened to door to suffering. Because of that, there is no real life without a share of suffering, and those who try to isolate themselves from it end up living in a pretend plastic world. It is impossible to really live in this world without suffering. We will all get our share as surely as the sun rises and sets.

(ii) Secondly, God is not remote from human suffering but suffers with us. If God is integrally involved with everything that happens in this world and God's word upholds it, then God cannot be removed or remote from our suffering. God suffers with us. God suffers with any part of the created order that suffers. One might even say that God suffers more than we do - when we are in turmoil or in pain God is more so. Jesus' life and his death show us the extent of God's suffering with and for us. So those of you who suffer now, God is present with you in your suffering, suffering with you and on your behalf. What you are going through is as a result of simply being human, God in Christ is going through more. In many ways this is what the incarnation is all about.

(iii) Suffering should never be looked upon as a good thing. To try and put a positive spin on someone's suffering or even your own suffering is twisted. God never made the world for suffering; it is a result of something bad and it is in itself only bad through and through. Even so, God is able to bring good out of suffering. In fact God, being God, will never waste suffering. Although it is inevitable, God is never content to leave it there but seeks to bring some good out of suffering and seeks to turn it to some good account. And if we are open there are things we can learn about ourselves, the world and God through suffering that we learn in no other way.

Perhaps we can think again of Haiti in this regard. Has any good come out of this terrible tragedy? I think that an enormous amount of goodness and grace has emerged in the wake of this terrible suffering. From the brokers of global finance annulling the interest on Haiti's international loans for the next five years, to millions of dollars of international aid being poured into the nation; not to mention thousands of relief workers giving sacrificially to help the earthquake victims. Then there is the boy in London who raised 100,000 pounds for earthquake relief in Haiti by cycling around a park for a day! There has been an almost unprecedented response of generosity and assistance, care, compassion and help from the global community in response to this tragedy, not to mention all the Christians who have prayed as well.

Can God not be at least given some credit for this also? We are quick to blame God for the disaster, and quick to give ourselves the credit for the help that has been given in

consequence, but how much of this help has been inspired and empowered by God at work in people's lives, be they believers or not, inspired by the example of Christ and all those followers of Christ who have helped and given sacrificially to others down through the ages? Not to mention the believers who have prayed and seek to pray God's own sustaining word into this situation of suffering and grief. Can we not give God any credit for this, or is he just the mean distant ogre that allowed it to happen in the first place? Can we not regard this as a human expression of God in Christ continuing to sustain all things with his word of power? But in Christ, and through the power of the spirit, it is in cooperation with God's people, not remote and impersonal but through the lives of people God has called and chosen.

(iv) And finally, there is promise that comes to those who suffer. The promise is that because God is a God of grace, ultimately more good will come to those who suffer because of that grace, than would have ever come apart from it. Suffering becomes the occasion for an outpouring of God's grace that will in the end bring blessing. This can never justify suffering but it does mitigate it, perhaps even God's way of making up for the inevitability of suffering by giving even more grace. Again we can think of Haiti in this regard, for if the world community continues to take responsibility for rebuilding this nation, it may never again be the poorest nation in the western world. True, this comes at a huge cost in terms of human misery and can never be seen to justify that misery, but can it not be seen as the gracious work of a good God in a world in which suffering is an inevitability?

Conclusion

Well, who among us is suffering? I believe that God wants to speak to those who are suffering in some way or another here this morning. And if you have been attentive to the Spirit as I have been speaking you will know which of this applies to you and what you can discard. So lay hold of what God has said to you this morning in the midst of your suffering. It won't make it any easier, it won't turn what is bad into what is good, but it will sustain you. It is Christ's powerful word that sustains all things and will bear you up.

However, I want to close by returning to my chicken. Remember my eggbound chicken? Let me tell you what finally happened. After several days of trying to save this chicken it died. For four days I held it in a warm bath for 20 mins to try and get the contractions going, I lubricated its vent, I fed it diluted cat food through a pipette, I quarantined it from the other chooks so that it would not be pecked and bothered, and on Wednesday morning the chicken died. It was awful, the whole thing and it left me feeling miserable. But you know something good also happened in the midst of it all. I formed a bond with that chicken because of all the time I had spent caring for it, and that chicken experienced human compassion in a way that none of the other chickens have experienced it. You may laugh but that is no small thing - one of the greatest gifts one creature can give another is compassion. Your care and your compassion is perhaps the most precious thing you can give another person, because compassion changes people, it softens them and develops them and gives them strength and confidence. Human compassion even changes animals!

Your suffering represents an opportunity to experience human compassion, and beyond that God's compassionate touch on your life. It is an expression of God's compassion through the action and the words of another human being. To be touched in compassion by another human being in the midst of your suffering is to be touched by God. To be spoken to with tenderness and in care by another human being in the midst of suffering is to be spoken to by Christ himself, it is to receive the word of God that upholds and establishes all things. And those who respond to the suffering in deed and word cooperate with God in the declaration of that word that upholds every living thing. To respond to a person who suffers in this way, is to respond as Christ responds, to become a conduit for God's grace in the midst of suffering and a means by which God can speak the word of power that upholds into the life of another.